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Creating an environment at the national and international levels conducive to generating full and productive employment and decent work for all, and its impact on sustainable development

Statement submitted by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

THE STRENGTH AND SUSTENANCE OF DECENT WORK

"Work is a source of dignity, of family stability, and of peace in the overall society. Work is linked with a person's sense of identity; indeed, almost all spiritual and religious traditions recognize that work is a source of personal dignity."
(Juan Somavia, Director-General of the ILO)

I am pleased to be with you today to think with you about this important subject of The Philosophical and Spiritual Perspectives of Decent Work. I will address myself to the spiritual dimension of the strength and sustenance of Decent Work with a focus on three areas: Dignity of the person, decent workplaces, and awareness of the collective whole.

Dignity of the person:

Personal dignity is a state of being. It can never be fully taken away from an individual so long as he or she continues to hold on to it internally. The realization and conscious awareness that dignity is intrinsic can give us strength and hope and can be a powerful tool to help overcome such indignities as unemployment, poverty, and the loss of liberty or opportunities.

In August of this year (2005), I was walking in one of the local markets in Guatemala City looking for souvenirs and other small gifts. In the midst of brightly coloured fabrics that covered books, handbags, and rugs, I was drawn to a stall of ceramic pottery. I was particularly attracted to the ceramic bowls that were hand-made. I picked up four bowls and my Guatemalan friend who accompanied me said, "Let me get this as a gift for you." She then turned to the vendor, who was a young woman of about 18 years and asked for the price of the bowls. "60 quetzals," the young woman replied. My friend instantly started to bargain with her, saying that this was too much and that they should be given at a lesser price. The young woman said, "O.K., then 55 quetzals." My friend then said, "These bowls are worth no more than 40 quetzals and so please give them to us for this price." At this point my attention was drawn away from the products in the stall to the expression on the young woman's face and especially to the look in her eyes. She very firmly stated that she could not give the bowls for less than 55 quetzals and proceeded to explain the efforts that went into making the bowls. The young woman's entire countenance was concentrated on upholding the value of her creation. She was not going to devalue the product. What was most striking was the look in her eyes. It was clear that if she sold the bowls for less than 55 quetzals, she would lose more than money. The exchange that was going on between her and my friend was surely taking a toll on her identity. To devalue the product to which she had made such a significant creative contribution devalued her as a person. My eyes met and held hers for only a few seconds, but it was long enough for me to understand that I must respect her for holding on to her inner state of personal dignity and honour her price. I said to my friend, "Give her what she is asking for, 55 quetzals." Perhaps because I was not the one involved in the actual bargaining of the price, I was able to step back and observe her body language. The way she stood, moved, talked, and looked made it clear that this woman has dignity built right in her spiritual genes! A young person with such a strong sense of her own dignity can grow up to be an adult who can take risks, deal with challenging situations, and act to uphold the dignity of others.

The spiritual principle that virtues are intrinsic and innate in every human being is something that we need to reflect on regularly. We need to ask ourselves, "do my actions add to or detract from the dignity of the other person?" Dignity is a value that includes self-respect and respect for others. It emerges from the intrinsic and innate virtues of peace, love, joy, purity, and truth, which are present within every human being.

Our deep realization of this spiritual principle is a powerful entry point to deepen the conversation about work from the necessary traditional constructs of employer/employee, job description/pay check, and roles/responsibilities into the spirit of the true meaning of work: creative contribution, productive participation, and a working community characterized by caring and sharing.

Decent Workplaces: Safe Spaces to Be, to Aspire, and to Act

The world is the field of action in which each individual is an actor playing their part in a unique and special way. The unlimited nature of the world stage accommodates each individual in such a way that every human being has the opportunity to aspire to spiritual growth and, at the same time, to contribute their talents, skills, expertise, and specialties to the world through their actions. The universal ethic is that there are enough resources in the world to feed, clothe, and house every individual, as well as to provide each with a job. The workplace is a part of the world stage. The world of work in its highest form is a meeting place of the innate spiritual values of the soul with the core material values of Mother Nature.

In an ideal world, workplaces would be spaces that bring people from all sectors together in conversations that expand possibilities, conversations filled with insights, ideas, and fresh perspectives. They would be open spaces that give people permission to be their unique selves. They would be safe spaces that invite people to express their visions, dreams, and innovations with trust and safety. They would be appreciative spaces where people's contributions are valued, and where they are acknowledged for them. They would be reflective spaces where people move into quiet and silence recognizing that they are part of a whole system; the ambiance would be generated by the living presence of the people through their inner contentment and outer satisfaction. They would be learning spaces that encourage the growth of people from diverse backgrounds, faith traditions, and cultures.

A gathering such as the one we are having here has the potential to elevate our collective vision and to rise above the disappointment we feel around conditions and circumstances of work many people in the world are forced to tolerate, and to focus instead on what the workplace looks like when we have an elevated vision of people and work. At the risk of sounding like a naïve idealist, I would like to cite some experiments that are being explored in creating such safe work spaces.

- One such place is the large Brazilian electric utility that serves Brazil and Paraguay, where they have built a hospital on the border of the two countries to elevate the quality of healthcare of the indigenous people who live on the border between these two countries, some of whom work at the hospital.

- Another is a coffee roaster company in the United States that has a meditation room on the premises and regularly flies their employees to the source countries from where the company buys coffee so that they can meet the people in the source countries and work with them to improve their farming techniques and set up cooperatives. (Green Mountain Coffee Roasters)

- And there is the food and health products company in India that is teaching rural Indian women how to teach about and sell products such as soap and iodized salt in their rural neighbourhoods so that they can experience the pride that comes of having an income, while at the same time helping their neighbours understand health issues such as the way that soap can eliminate bacteria and how important iodine is for the body. (Hindustan Lever)

Of course we know that the spaces in which the majority of people work today are far from decent, and do not foster stability and peace in the societies where they are situated. Problems, overreaction, and strained relationships characterize the workplace. In many so-called progressive work environments the stress levels are so high that people are in constant danger of hypertension, cardiac-related diseases, and a number of psychosomatic disorders. Workplaces mirror the values of the societies in which they are situated, often resulting in individuals being devalued for their efforts and having to cope with various forms of discriminations due to race, religion and gender biases.

Awareness of the Collective Whole

In examining the concept of Decent Work, it is important to do so with an awareness of the collective whole.

If we were to redirect our awareness from the physical bodies and the material world and develop the capacity to see the subtle energy that connects us in spiritual relationships, we would be able to see the whole genealogical tree of humanity. Like any tree, the tree of humanity is connected to one Seed, which is God. From that seed came the roots and trunk of the human race and the branches and leaves of all of the many religious families that make up the larger human world tree. We are all connected to one another through the subtle threads of thoughts, feelings, words, actions and relationships. If we were to use the metaphor of the genealogical tree of humanity as the platform from which to implement the four objectives of the Decent Work Agenda, it could be quite interesting. The four objectives are:

- Full employment;
- Workers' rights;
- Social protection; and
- Social dialogue.

If we were to dissolve the boundaries that divide us, this would not only lead us to experience a deep sense of connection, but also to a heightened sense of the possibility for real change. Looking at the whole from this heightened perspective, we could choose to either look at the problem of the lack of decent work with an attitude of a quick fix, or we could address the fundamental sources of the problem. Considered from the perspective of the genealogical tree of humanity the fundamental solutions would require us to collaborate among the different groups as we would among different parts of our family. We would not blame any one individual, but rather would understand that we have unintentionally created the problem together, and that therefore we have to cooperate and commit ourselves to its solution. To simply observe and turn away from the indecencies of sex-trafficking of young children, social exclusion, and discrimination and exploitation based on caste, colour, creed and gender biases in formal and non-formal settings would be totally unacceptable, because we would feel connected to one another in the deepest way. It is unacceptable because an indecent act that humiliates any one part of the tree, takes the dignity away from the whole tree and the entire human family suffers as a result.

When we look at one another with this heightened perspective and unified vision, we see with different eyes. We don't just see a woman selling bowls: we see a sister, or perhaps a distant cousin, who has poured her heart into the creation of a set of colourful handmade bowls, and we are moved to offer to her a fair and respectful price for the precious value she is offering to us with these bowls.

Securing Decent Work for all demands a unified vision and a spirit of inclusion, equity, and fairness. What we need now is to increase our capacity to turn our attention to the source, the seed of this tree, and look for redirection and renewal. Until we can do this, we really cannot step into a new awareness.

Paper presented at a roundtable on the theme "Philosophical and Spiritual Perspectives on Decent Work", organized by the ILO Headquarters and held under the auspices of the International Institute for Labour Studies (ILS) and co-sponsored by the Bureau for External Relations and Partnerships of the ILO (EXREL). November 16, 2005. Presenter: Gayatri Naraine, Representative of Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University to the United Nations, New York.

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